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# A SHORT TREATISE ON READING ALOUD.

BY ERNEST LEGOUVÉ.

*Translated (with kind permission of Messrs. Hetzel, of Paris) for the  
"Parents' Review."*

## FIRST PART.

IN America, reading aloud is considered one of the most important elements of public instruction ; it is one of the bases of elementary teaching.

In France, it is not even reckoned as one of the so-called lighter arts or accomplishments ; it is looked upon as a curiosity, as a superfluity, even as an affectation.

Examine all grades of instruction ; nowhere will it be found. Is there a "course" of reading aloud, classes for its study, lectures on it, prizes for it, in any of the elementary schools ? No. In commercial and industrial schools ? No. In the colleges ? No. Neither masters nor pupils learn to read aloud. Pass on to the private educational establishments ; take in their turn each of the liberal professions. Where do you find this study ? Do barristers learn to read aloud ? No. Do magistrates ? No. Do solicitors, registrars, or members of the scientific associations ? No. We have masters for all our organs, all our limbs, all our occupations. We are taught to dance, to swim, to box, to jump, to fence, to run ; the organ which is in use all day, in all circumstances of life, the instrument which serves as intermediary in all our connections with other people, the *voice* alone receives no instruction.

Whence arises this singular anomaly ? From three causes. Reading aloud is neglected or rejected (1) as useless, (2) as superfluous, (3) as impossible. Let us examine these three reasons from the elementary school point of view.

Without doubt the art of reading aloud is agreeable, but it is also and above all useful.

To consider only children, one word will suffice. What is their chief duty ? To learn lessons and repeat them aloud. What should be their aim ? To learn their lessons as quickly as possible, to recite them as well as possible, and to remember

them as long as possible. Now that the art of reading will surely enable the pupils to attain these three objects will be proved to you by my answer to the second objection.

Superfluous education is one of the great evils of our existing system of public instruction. Pupils succumb under the quantity of subjects. The time tables are positively plethoric. The class-rooms are too small for the number of scholars they contain. The hours are too short for the lessons that are crowded into them. Time is insufficient for teachers as well as for scholars. How then find room for a new subject ? Where place it ? What would give way for it ? The answer is easy. The art of reading can only benefit education where it adds nothing, eliminates nothing, supersedes nothing, but by assimilation is our aid to all things. It is not a tax but an aid to memory ; it does not fatigue, but relieves and supports the mind. It is to education what the gastric juice is to the nutritive process : it causes and facilitates digestion ; it is not in itself a new factor, but a component part of all the other factors.

The study of reading ought to bear on every subject. It is not a question of making pupils read selected pieces ; it should be imperiously required from them, that they should not read a single page, that they should not give a single explanation, or a single answer, or recite a single lesson, without observing the fundamental laws of the art of reading.

This brings us far enough away from those public recitations on prize-days, which consist in putting children on a platform, dressed in their best clothes, and making them repeat some fable or dialogue with studied gestures, studied accents, and studied expressions. I should not like to grieve the parents to whom such ceremonies are a delight, but I cannot forget the jeers of the listeners, who, when all is over, amid paroxysms of laughter imitate the attitudes and intonations of these poor children.

Simple stories, easy poetry, facts and ideas within their grasp, such should be the subject matter given to children. It is not a question of teaching them to dance ; they must learn to walk ; they should read nothing but what they can perfectly well feel and understand.

It was towards the spring of 1868. At a league's distance from my house lived one of those men to whom one could

justly apply Madame de Sévigné's remark about Montaigne, "What a charming neighbour to have in the country." Monsieur St. Marc Girardin, for it is of him I speak, united in his own person, curiously enough, the contrast of a sceptical mind and an affectionate heart. I have never known a more tender friend, a more trustworthy adviser, or a more delightful companion for a friendly chat—complete liberty in conversation joined to absolute frankness. His common-sense clothed itself in raillery, of which he was so fond that it delighted him in others, even if the joke turned against himself; it is true that in point of repartee he was thoroughly competent to give a Roland for an Oliver.

To him I went, to submit to him my idea of writing a treatise on the art of reading aloud, and of making it the subject of a conference at the College de France. After listening seriously and attentively, he said: "My friend, on that theme you may be able to make some brilliant variations, some bravura airs, which will meet with applause, but a serious lesson, no; reading is not an art. It is the natural function of a natural organ. There are people who read well; there are others who read badly; but the talent of the former is a gift, a charm, an accomplishment, anything you like that answers. It cannot be taught. Practise of this natural gift may give rise to some useful precepts, such as these: 'You should not speak or read too much; ' in the same way 'You should not walk too much or eat too much; ' ' You should not read too loud or too fast; ' ' You should endeavour to understand what you read, and make it understood by others; ' but beyond these summary instructions, which would occupy but a few lines, there are no such precise or definite rules for reading as would constitute it an art. The art of reading condenses itself into a single rule—You must read as you speak."

I had great faith in M. St. Marc Girardin's taste, and I knew his rare sincerity; but in this case I was convinced I was in the right, and moreover, I discovered beneath his criticisms a thought to which he did not give utterance, and of which he himself was not, perhaps, conscious but which existed, nevertheless, at the bottom of his heart. "When all is said and done, I, St. Marc Girardin, read very well, and I have never learnt; therefore, it is unnecessary to learn."

So I resumed.

"My dear friend, there is a certain amount of truth in what you say. It is the same argument used by all witty and well read men of the world in regard to a subject which they have not studied. In spite, therefore, of your being a professor at the Sorbonne, you speak on this point as a man of the world. You talk wittily on a subject you know nothing about."

This unexpected rebuff rather nettled him.

I continued calmly.

"The talent of reading is undoubtedly, in a great measure, a gift. For it is unlike other arts, which are closed to you until you have served your apprenticeship to them. Many men, without special study, read pleasantly and with grace. You are a proof of it, for you read with effect, you are applauded when you read; but you do not read—pardon my frankness—you do not read well."

At this remark he smiled incredulously. "What! I do not read well?"

"No, and the proof of it is that should any one else read as you do, he would read badly."

"Please explain yourself," said he, laughing.

"Nothing easier. I have heard you read at the Sorbonne, during your course of lectures, fragments from Lamartine, from Corneille, from Victor Hugo, and at the Academy I have heard you read your own discourses. The difference was immense."

"In what way?" said he, somewhat puzzled.

"In this way. The verses of our great poets, as read by you, produced much applause. Why? Because into that reading you put a great deal of your own intelligence, your own superiority of mind; because you have a ringing voice, and an air of decision, personal charms which cloaked your defects."

"What are my defects, if you please?"

"By force of its sonority, your voice is apt at times to become harsh. Your delivery is occasionally slightly declamatory or emphatic, and emphasis is never displeasing to young people. But change your audience and give your mannerism to some one who has neither your superiority nor your authority, and to whom nothing but your mannerism

would remain, and he would fail to please for the sole reason that he had imitated you too entirely. Now nothing is good which cannot be imitated without danger. Therefore, you read with talent, but not as one who knows how to read."

"Even my own discourses?"

"Oh! your own discourses nobody could read as well as you."

"Why, do not my faults show themselves there as well?"

"There, your defects become qualities, because they form part of your personality. An example will give you a better idea of my meaning. Jules Sandeau had written a charming thesis in answer to one of Camille Doucet's. He asked me to read it for him in public. 'I should not think of doing so,' said I. 'Why not? You would read it much better than I should.' 'I dare say I should, but I should not read it as well. Your thesis is *you*. It is true that in reading I should not commit the same mistakes as you would; I should not drop my final syllables; I should give point to the witty remarks; but I could not assume that nonchalant position, that indolent intonation, that air of utter indifference which completes your words by your individuality, and which in you are charming, because quite natural, but would be displeasing in me because they would be copied. Your discourse is that of a man who is fair and plump, I should read it as a man who is thin and dark; better read it yourself.' He took my word for it, and his success proved that I was right. But had he read anybody else's discourse in the same way it would have been a failure."

"Your anecdote is a pretty one," said M. St Marc Girardin. "But I do not see its point. I understand what you say, but I do not see what moral you wish to deduce."

"Another example may perhaps make you see it more clearly. As a reader, M. Viennet had a great reputation, which he fully deserved when he read his own poetry. The hoarse voice, the brusque and would-be frank gestures, the lock of hair standing upright on his head like a cock's comb, the jovial intonations, all were the exact prototype of his class of talent, with all its vivacity and faint tinge of vulgarity. Add to that, that he looked leniently upon any of his own productions; he was singularly well pleased with himself, and this fact gave to his delivery when reading his own poems a

warmth and fire which electrified his audience. It was once proposed that I should read some verses of M. Viennet's at the Academy. I declined. Said I, 'Neither the verses nor I would be a success, for I should be entirely lacking in that which is essentially a part of M. Viennet's *success*: viz., the belief that what I was reading was a masterpiece.'

This harmless little epigram made M. St. Marc Girardin laugh, and he added gaily:

"The inference, the inference. What inference do you draw from all this?"

"I infer that one must not say of an author that he reads well because he commands applause when he reads his own writings; in many cases his very defects as a reader contribute to his *success*; the man is of more importance than the reader. I infer that certain chosen spirits, certain peculiarly gifted organisations, such as yours, which may be allowed to dispense with fixed rules, because you break them so gracefully, must not be taken into consideration. 'Art is not for thee, thou hast no need of it.' But I also infer that ordinary mortals, the masses, the majority, the lower classes, require to learn to read, and that the science which would be useful even to superior beings (for, my dear friend, the fact of your being a little more scientific would not detract from your inborn talent) is absolutely necessary to all others."

"But what does this science consist of? How define it?"

"The art of speaking and reading correctly."

"Correctness implies rules. What are these rules?"

"They are of two kinds—material and intellectual—for the art of reading depends on the functions of a physical organ, the voice, and on those of the spiritual organ of thought. Shall we first discuss the voice?"

"Willingly," said M. St. Marc Girardin.

"Well, then, as precision is requisite, I will reduce my remarks to writing, and then I will bring them to you."

But, alas! the war broke out; I wrote nothing, I took him nothing, and it is only three months ago that I drew up this summary of my experiences, for the use of pupils in the elementary schools, at the express request of M. Bercot, one who is very much interested in public education.

(To be continued.)